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ABSTRACT

In order to understand the place of Herbert Read both in 20th century aesthetics and art education, one needs to carefully consider the entire field of English art and aesthetics from 1900 to the beginning of the Second World War. This time frame was dominated by the thoughts of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, and works both literary and visual, of the Bloomsbury Group. This period in English art and design was characterized by the response of Roger Fry to cubism and the work of the avant garde in Europe. By 1912 Fry had his post-impressionist show at the Crofton Galleries. English art at the time either reflected the romanticism of the Royal Academy, mysticism, or the crafts traditions of William Morris. It was a time of not only artistic ferment, but an aesthetic revolution. The modern movement entered into England and was interpreted through the eyes of Fry and Bell. They gave it a peculiar English quality. Sir Herbert Read reflected much of the Fry and Bell points of view as he developed his artistic philosophy in the 1930s. Read's basic philosophy can be found in his now classic work, "Education Through Art." Read assumes that beauty is the essence of art, and his account of beauty brings together but fails to unite various strands. On the one hand, he is a Platonist claiming that beauty consists in the conformity of forms to mathematical norms which also underlie the appearances of the natural world; but, on the other hand, he insists that pleasure is the essence of beauty, reducing judgments about beauty to mere expressions of personal likes or dislikes. (Author)

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Sir Herbert Read and
Art Education History

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Herbert Read & Art Education History

Abstract

In order to understand the place of Herbert Read both in 20th century aesthetics as well as art education, one needs to carefully consider the entire field of English Art and Aesthetics from 1900 to the beginning of the second war.

This time frame was dominated by the thoughts of Roger Fry and Clive Bell and the works, both literary and visual, of the Bloomsbury Group. This period in English Art and Design was characterized by the response of Roger Fry to cubism and the work of the avante-garde in Europe.

By 1912 Fry had held his post-impressionist show at the Crofton Galleries. English Art at the time either reflected the romanticism of the Royal Academy or the Mysticism of Pre-Raphaelites and the crafts traditions of William Morris. It was a time of not only artistic ferment but an aesthetic revolution. The modern movement entered into England and was interpreted through the eyes of Fry and Bell. They gave to it a peculiar English quality. Sir Herbert Read reflected much of the Fry and Bell points of view as he developed his artistic philosophy in the 1930's.

Read's basic philosophy can be found in his now classic work, Education Through Art. In 'Education Through Art' Read assumes that beauty is the essence of art, and his account of beauty brings together but fails to unite various strands. On the one hand, he is a Platonist claiming that beauty consists in the conformity of forms to mathematical norms which also underly the appearances of the natural world; but, on the other hand, he wants to insist that pleasure is the essence of beauty; and this view, notoriously, reduces judgements about beauty to mere expressions of personal likes or dislikes. This second view must result in judgements about art qua art being on the same footing as any other expression of personal tastes and as such 'would seem ultimately to deny the possibility of art at all'.

Background

Almost a quarter century ago John Keel (Keel, 1963) demonstrated the importance of Sir Herbert Read for American as well as British Art Education history. Read emerged from the years between the 1900 - 1940.

In England the ideas of Clive Bell (Bell, 1913) and Roger Fry (Fry, 1932) still dominated British critical and aesthetic thinking as well as British art education. What Read did was to infuse the ideas of Jung into art and art education thought where they merged with Bell's formalism to produce a synthesis which was greater than the past. Let us turn to some of the recent research done on Sir Herbert thoughts and influence.

Meeson has considered some of the inconsistencies in Read's thought by an examination of his "Education Through Art". Read attempted the merger of formalism with Platonic thought and in Meeson's view failed.

The use to which Read puts Plato is, in any case, put in doubt by his failure to come to terms with, or even consider, Plato's attitude towards art as mimesis. Meeson exposes other incoherences and discusses possible historical reasons why Read tried to ride his philosophical horses in opposed directions simultaneously, and why the book has been so influential in educational circles where an unsustainable burden was placed upon it. (Meeson, 1974)

The article by Meeson (1974) which clearly outlined Read's theory of art and detailed its' platonic traditions probably coming from both Bell & Fry. The allusion to the mathematical natures of not only Read's theories of art but of the mathematical basis of platonic thought itself brings us to a heretofore unnoticed influence of the American design theorist, Jay Hambidge. (Hambidge, 1968) Hambidge was well known in England in the 1920s for his theories of dynamic symmetry and his ideas were familiar to both Fry and Bell. The Golden Section was used in the works of many of the Bloomsbury group, such as Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant (McWhinnie, 1987).

In the decade before the Second World War, Hampstead was a microcosm of much that was new and vital in Europe. An exhibition celebrating that decade at the Camden Arts Centre in Jan. 1975, organized by Michael Collins demonstrates the mixture of ideas and activities that typified Hampstead of this period. The list of 'Hampstead Artists and Designers' includes Naum Gabo, Paul Nash, Herbert Read, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and the architects Wells Coates, Colin Lucas, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. The list of writers is nearly as long as that of the 44 artists represented in the exhibition. Happily many of the buildings by Hampstead architects are still well preserved in the borough.

In terms of the development of British Art Education, the ideas of Fry, Bell and Read stood firmly against the academic traditions of the Royal Academy.

Regional schools of art and design were formed and the influence of the Glasgow School of Art was merged with the direction of the modern movement. Read was a complex figure to say the least. If he had one foot in the more formal world of the Hampstead Group which reflect they structure of the Bauhaus, the influence of the Vortist Group, and the ideas of Whydom Lewis; he certainly had his other foot, clearly in the Bloomsbury world of Clive and Vanessa Bell.

He also shared the strong ideas and goals of the English Marxists thought with the painters of the day. The art historian Anthony Blunt of course was at the center of so much that occurred in the 1930s, both in the political as well as aesthetic worlds. Anthony Blunt, the art historian and sometimes spy, relates Sir Herbert Read to at least some of the more radical social and political thoughts of the Cambridge Group of Blunt, Keyes, and Turing. Part of Read's idea of the foundation of art and education in society reflected both the social consciousness of British Marxist thought as well as the psychological insights of Freud and Jung.

Blunt has recalled in a sketch for an intellectual autobiography, discussing the friends and places which acted as formative influences. After a childhood spent in Paris and at Marlborough, where Blunt met Louis McNeice, he discovered Bloomsburyism and Marxism at Cambridge, where he came under the influence of Berenson. He would later come into conflict with Herbert Read and Roland Penrose over the meaning of Picasso's 'Guernica'.

Hampstead in the 1930s was a vital center of international art, architecture and thinking. Refugees came, assured of a warm welcome. Paul Nash and others in 1933 founded 'unit one' and called for 'the expression of a truly contemporary spirit'. Herbert Read's 'Unit One Book' and 'Circle', edited by Leslie Martin, Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo, followed. There was no 'Hampstead Group' but there

was a common attitude marking the artists out as modernists. In totality, their work was to be of immense influence in the post-war years.

Read's early marxism has caused problems with subsequent acceptance or rejection of Read's ideas. A recent article in a Soviet journal is of interest here and it in essence views Read as not being true to the ideas that he first achieved in his book, *Art and Society*. The Soviet critic observed that knowledge and enjoyment of art cultivates the sensibilities, develops taste and arouses a wide variety of needs which characterize the human personality, but little is known about the psychological processes whereby beautiful things are appreciated. However, it seems that some mental effort is required, some exercise of the imagination, which results in increased creative drive in many spheres of life, including science and politics. The author presses for more of the curricula in Soviet schools to be devoted to art, and criticizes the elitist and consumer orientated aspects of art in the capitalist western states. She specifically denigrates Herbert Read for a Utopian faith in art in education as an adequate means for producing a truly spontaneous creative society.

In American Art Education the influences of Read can be seen clearly in the writings of Vincent Lanier (Lanier, 1968, 1987) Lanier has recently observed that the DBAE (discipline-based-art-education avocated by the Getty trust) can be faulted for its' elitist point of view towards the nature of aesthetic experience.

I believe that one problem most of today's marxists critics have with Read and his ideas is that they are a very strong blending of aesthetic journalism of the Bloomsbury group with the socialist doctrines of the Cambridge side of Anthony Blunt. Also Read's clearly Jungian point of view does not, as expressed in the Russian article, seem to relate to the social point of view of his positions. The

Soviet's have been especially critical of Read and his writings on this point. They discuss the aesthetics of Herbert Read. While partly accepting his critique of Bourgeois Society, the author rejects his Freudian and Jungian bias, anti-rationalist stance, and implicit suggestion that art is essentially in opposition to society, stating that he makes an unsuccessful attempt to combine a social and a psychoanalytical approach. Even alienation is treated in a non-marxist sense, and appears as a permanent state, rather than being socially determined. His attempt to link man with his social context is so abstract that it is doomed to failure.

I think that some of these recent reviews of Read's importance and his position in the development of modern art and aesthetic, fail on the grounds that they view as being essentially inconsistent the very real attempts that Read made to attempt to reconcile those alternate positions. One needs to consider the components of:

- (a) English Formalism of Bell & Fry
- (b) Marxism of Blunt
- (c) Psychoanalytic theories of Jung

The conflicts in Read's thinking between a purely personal aesthetic and one which relates to social issues has troubled many who have discussed Read and his writings in recent times.

An article entitled "The Failure of Modernisms in the Visual Arts", discusses the difficulty of defining 'Modernism', a term which embraces a wide variety of styles excepting realism and naive painting. Herbert Read argued that the modern artist presents symbolically several levels of experience, some of which are more important than the imitation of external phenomena. This implies, the author considers, that such imitation is the ultimate goal of representational art, a

representational element in the work of Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin, overestimates their role as 'Revolutionary' Fathers of Modern Art'.

An article by Donnell (Donnell, 1975) appeals to Gombrich and Arnheim (on the basis that the thesis, which they share, that we mentally construct our own perceptions, means that we can see things however we like), attacks H. R. Rookmaker, Sven Lovgren, Herbert Read and Roger Fry, and concludes with some observations based on the writings and Suzanne Langer and R. G. Collingwood. I think that the article by Donnell demonstrates that non-marxism critics and historians also have trouble with the 3 components of Read's theories, with what I shall describe as the "Read Triad".

An article by Woodcock (1972) has address some of the problems with Read's thought that seemed to grow out of apparent inconsistencies in not only the events of his life, but from his writings as well. Described by its author as a pre-biography, this book is in fact a charting of Read's intellectual life and critique of his achievement as poet and anarchist, novelist and autobiographer, critic of art, literature and life, aesthetic philosopher and revolutionary theorist of education. The author demonstrates how Read's mental world assumed the form of the Mandala, that symbol of the everlasting return which had peculiar significance for him; the circular pattern of Read's only novel, 'The Green Child', was repeated in the author's own life when he returned to his native Yorkshire, and the same pattern can be detected in his poetry, in his anarchism, even in his art criticism which presupposes a constant return to the archetypal. Following a biographical introduction, the chapters deal seriatim with his imaginative prose (including autobiography), his poetry, his literary criticism, his aesthetics, his view of the social role of art, his anarchism, his educational theories, and, in the final chapter

entitled 'The Stream Returns', Read's work considered as a whole.

I think that it also is clear from the writings of those whom I have cited thus far in this paper, that part of the trouble with Read's views and theories is in the fact that he attempted to apply ideas of child development and education in art to the wider issues of art criticism and art theory.

In an article by Luckett (1979) with reference to Herbert Read's 'Education Through Art' (1943), the author analyses its' approach and its' influence on the development of art education since the Second World War. He proceeds to examine the role of museums and art galleries in education and the problems of achieving the kind of environment ideal for the encouragement of aesthetic development. In terms of this, he discusses 'The Art Museum as Educator' (1978), a compendium or art gallery education work in the U.S.A. compiled over the previous six years, 'A Child's Guide to Looking at Paintings' by Terence Measham and Frances Kennet, 'Looking at Pictures with Rolf Harris', 'Enjoying Pictures' by Helen Kapp, 'Museums and Galleries' by Molly Harrison, and 'Mein Museumsbuch' by Renate Friedlander.

A critical study by Lutchmannsign (1974) has taken a valuable general look at Read and his development. In that study he argued that Sir Herbert Read's advocacy of modern art between the early 1930s and mid-1960s was based on the critical approaches of several thinkers. Read was a synoptic interpreter of art, open to various and sometimes contradictory ideas, and convinced that no single formula could illuminate the diversity of modern movements. Consequently his own writings are neither art criticism nor art history, but what he called 'Philosophical Criticism'. For Read, modern art no longer presented the truths of tradition and culture, but those of evolving human consciousness and experience.

Thus, modernism was revolutionary, and looked beyond the post-Renaissance mode for inspiration. This study examines Read's principles, and finds them sometimes to be ambiguous, too strained and too procrustean; yet at other times illuminating and felicitous. After the Second World War, a final ambiguity in Read's position occurred when he opposed the attempt by some artists to merge art and life and to reduce the image to its pure visibility.

Read's influences and observations have gone into multiple directions. His ideas about formalism caused him to make some highly original observations about visual forms and math. An article by Levanto (1977) discusses mathematical concepts of art from Durer's *Melancholia I* to the 20th century, referring to Jung's theories about the role of numbers in the human psyche and suggesting that these ideas have not been seriously applied to the visual arts. Herbert Read's definition of a mathematician as an abstract artist who has not put his ideas in plastic form and the ideas of Joseph Schillinger, who also tried to identify the position of mathematics in art, are mentioned and artists whose work is discussed include Malevich, Mondrian and Duchamp.

The humanization of art was a continued theme in Read's writing's and its power seen from the social and marxist base. A study of Bernheim (1974) has explored this avenue in depth. This study of Brosh's polyhistorical method concentrates on the multiple influences on his aesthetics, and their reappearance in 'Die Schlafwandler' as stylistic indications of naturalism, romanticism, expressionism and neue sachlichkeit. The key issues of ornamentation and abstraction are traced through their development in Worringer, Kandinsky, Gropius, Herbert Read and Brosh's friend Adolf Loos, the Viennese architect. Profoundly affected by alienation from certainty of belief, Brosh strove in his stylistic

experiments to reestablish a unified 'rehumanized' style for the artist. Brosh's trilogy is examined, and its key observations of art and architecture are seen to reveal the complexities of his often contradictory theories of cognition and style as forces needed to combat aesthetics sterility and alienation, and thus to prepare western man for ethical regeneration.

This is almost both pure Read as well as pure Marx. Read's work has to be viewed within a political and social context. Afassishew has documented clearly the plan of Read and others within such a context. (Afassishew, 1979) He argued that a strengthening of the ideological function of art in the context of the social conflicts and contradictions being encountered in western capitalist societies. Art is seen increasingly as a 'compensation' for the alienation and barrenness of everyday existence. By 1800, Schiller had described the aesthetic sphere as one where the faculties of man could develop harmoniously. John Dewey's analytical work of the 1930s and 1940s on this subject is also described. Thomas Munro ('Toward Science in Aesthetics') saw art either as contributing to 'Good Experience' or as providing a refuge of the imagination. Freud's ideas reduced art to a therapeutic medium, sublimating those drives and desires which are throttled by the structures of Bourgeois civilization. Finally, the ideas of Burrow in his book 'The Neurosis of Man' and Herbert Read in 'Art and Alienation' are examined and criticized.

Summary

There are some important implications of Read's thinking for the current wave of interest in DBAE. Lanier and others have raised questions that the excessive dependence on formalism in DBAE opens it to charges of eliteism. As this paper has tried to show, Sir Herbert Read attempted once probably failed to reconcile basic conflicts between an art education based on formalistic doctrines with one which more clearly related to the social. Can one predict a failure of DBAE if as a movement it persists with a formalistic aesthetic as a foundation for education in art.

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